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RIGHTS OF PERSONS BELONGING TO NATIONAL OR ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND LINGUISTIC MINORITIES

Written statement submitted by the Inter-Parliamentary Union a non-governmental organization with consultative status (category I) 1/

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

1. The following views, which were reaffirmed in September 1993 by the Council of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, come from the Symposium organized by the Union on the theme "Parliament: Guardian of human rights". This Symposium, which was held in the wake of the World Conference on Human Rights, took place in Budapest from 19 to 22 May 1993.

2. The Symposium focused essentially on the principles and means which are available to Parliaments and Members of Parliament so that they can promote human rights and effectively prevent any abuses in this field. It set out to define how Parliament could be more effective in its role as guardian of human rights and thereby encourage more resolute parliamentary action on human rights issues. The participants made a number of recommendations for action by parliamentarians and human rights organizations. 2/

Representation of minorities

3. The Symposium dwelt at some length on ways to ensure adequate representation of minorities in parliament.

4. There is obviously no universal solution to very diverse situations ranging from homogeneous nations having a single national ethnic or religious minority, to those which are a constellation of groups with no one predominating element.

5. Various solutions were put forward. Some proclaimed that minorities must first and foremost be represented through the politico-institutional system common to the entire nation. Either because minorities may be geographically dispersed - a situation that hampers their representation within constituency boundaries - or because they lack political cohesiveness, other speakers were in favour of special politico-institutional measures: election of their representative(s) by the communities themselves regardless of the territorial division into constituencies, establishment of quotas, appointments, reserved seats. Moreover, it was stressed that in some countries, particularly in Africa, where the great number of ethnic groups does not facilitate national cohesiveness, the recognition of political parties on ethnic lines would be harmful.

6. It was unanimously recognized that the representation of minorities in parliament goes hand in hand with respect for their right to take part in local decision-making bodies but also with recognition and free exercise of their own culture and language, and access by their members to education, with no discrimination whatsoever.

7. Several means through which parliament can ensure the protection of minorities were mentioned: setting up a specialized parliamentary body; making it a requirement for the Executive to report periodically to parliament on the implementation of the recommendations of the national body responsible for minority issues; appointing an independent commissioner for indigenous peoples who is also required to report to parliament.

8. 1993 being the International Year of Indigenous Peoples, it was deemed important that the Second World Conference on Human Rights take significant action on the historical injustices done to indigenous peoples.

Notes

1/ As of January 1994, 125 national Parliaments are represented in Inter-Parliamentary Union as members. IPU also has three international parliamentary assemblies as associate members: Andean Parliament, Latin American Parliament, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

2/ The full text of the final document of the Budapest Symposium is available from IPU Headquarters, Place du Petit-Saconnex, 1211 Geneva 19.